



Integrating Smart Tourism and Creative Economy: Toward an Adaptive Governance Model for Sustainable Rural Destinations

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Received: September 29, 2025 Revised: April 07, 2026 Accepted: April 10, 2026 Available online: April 23, 2026	This study aims to analyze the development of the Perintis Lake tourist area in Bone Bolango Regency, Gorontalo Province, through the integration of smart tourism and the creative economy as a policy strategy towards inclusive and sustainable tourism. This study reflects a paradigm shift from solely economic-based tourism to governance oriented toward technology, creativity, and community empowerment. The research method used descriptive qualitative methods, with primary data derived from observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions and secondary data from policy documents and scientific literature. The results indicate that the implementation of smart tourism in Perintis Lake is still limited by digital infrastructure and community technological literacy, while the creative economy is developing organically through MSMEs and Tourism Awareness Groups. The relationship between the two is symbiotic: digital technology expands markets and accelerates the promotion of local products, while the creative economy enriches cultural content and digital tourism experiences. The study formulated the Integrated Smart Creative Lake Tourism Model (ISCLTM), which integrates Smart Experience, Smart Business Ecosystem, Smart People, and Smart Governance within an adaptive feedback loop mechanism. This model emphasizes that destination competitiveness arises from the synergy of technological innovation, social creativity, and collaborative policies, not solely from digitalization.
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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism in rural destinations is increasingly assessed not only by the growth of visitor arrivals, but also by the capacity of governance systems to align digital transformation, local economic participation, and environmental responsibility. In public policy terms, tourism development becomes problematic when promotional success outpaces institutional readiness, because rising visitor flows intensify demands for service coordination, information management, and community inclusion (Goffi et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2015; Kemenko Perekonomian, 2025). This challenge is particularly relevant in rural destinations, where infrastructure capacity, digital access, and institutional coordination often develop unevenly.

The smart tourism ecosystem perspective provides an important analytical lens for understanding this condition. Smart tourism is not merely the introduction of information and communication technology into destination management, but an ecosystem in which data, platforms, public institutions, businesses, residents, and visitors interact to co-produce tourism experiences and governance outcomes (Gretzel, Sigala, et al., 2015; Gretzel, Werthner, et al., 2015). In this ecosystem, destination competitiveness depends on the integration of smart experience, smart people, smart business, and smart governance, rather than on the presence of isolated digital tools alone (Boes et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017). Consequently, a destination cannot be considered smart simply because visitor numbers increase or physical facilities expand. It must also possess the governance capacity to translate technology and data into coordinated public action.

This perspective becomes more critical when rural tourism is linked to the creative economy. In tourism settings, the creative economy functions as a process of value co-creation, because destination value is generated not only by formal managers but

also by MSMEs, cultural actors, Tourism Awareness Groups (Pokdarwis), and visitors who collectively shape local experiences and meanings (Bhatt et al., 2024; Pancawati & Widaswara, 2023). Culinary products, handicrafts, local narratives, and community-based attractions are therefore not supplementary elements, but part of the tourism value chain itself. However, such co-creation requires collaborative and innovative governance, namely governance arrangements that enable cross-sector coordination, shared problem solving, and adaptive policy learning among government, communities, and market actors (Andrades et al., 2024; Ansell & Gash, 2018).

These issues are highly visible in the Perintis Lake tourism area in Bone Bolango Regency, Gorontalo Province. The destination combines natural attractions, historical significance, and local cultural potential. Over the last five years, tourist arrivals increased from 16,402 in 2020 to 171,947 in 2024 (Disparpora, 2025). At one level, this trend indicates growing destination appeal. Yet it also reveals a governance paradox. Growth in visitor numbers has not been matched by equivalent improvements in digital infrastructure, destination information systems, service integration, or community-based management. Most tourism facilities remain conventional, and they are not yet connected to digital information systems or cashless payment services (Disparpora, 2021; Disparpora Bonbol, 2022; Fattah, 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2020; Melo & Niode, 2022; Yoo et al., 2017).

At the same time, creative economic activities are emerging through local MSMEs and Pokdarwis. Local culinary products, handicrafts, and community-based attractions enrich the tourism experience and demonstrate that economic creativity already exists within the destination. However, the governance problem lies not in the absence of local initiative but in the absence of an integrative policy arrangement that connects community creativity, digital infrastructure, and destination management. In

		observation, FGD	intermediary role in governance
Primary Data	Local academics	In-depth interviews, FGD	contextual interpretation of tourism governance and rural development
Primary Data	Tourists	Interviews and field observation	expectations regarding digital services, payment systems, destination information
Secondary Data	RIPPDA, Strategic Plan of the Tourism Office, visitor reports, facility records, and scientific literature	Document analysis	policy context, data triangulation, theoretical interpretation

Data collection was carried out in three mutually reinforcing stages. First, participant observation was conducted to examine social interaction patterns, tourism facilities, and the everyday operation of creative economy activities in the destination. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to explore perceptions of digital readiness, governance capacity, and the role of MSMEs and Pokdarwis in the tourism system. Third, focus group discussions were conducted to validate preliminary findings, identify cross-actor problems, and clarify areas where policy integration was perceived to fail in practice. Each stage was documented through field notes, audio recordings, and verbatim transcripts to strengthen the consistency of interpretation.

The data were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2021). The analysis proceeded through repeated familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, and reflective interpretation of relationships among themes. NVivo 12 Plus was used to organize the qualitative data and assist with coding patterns, cluster mapping, and thematic matrices. To deepen interpretation, this study also adopted a critical hermeneutic orientation, allowing the analysis to move beyond description and toward an explanation of how policy narratives, institutional fragmentation, and technological discourse shape the local tourism experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Data validity was maintained through source, method, and theory triangulation, supported by member checking and an audit trail to ensure transparency and interpretive credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Readiness and Structural Gaps in Smart Tourism Development

The empirical findings show that Perintis Lake has experienced a substantial increase in tourist arrivals, particularly after 2021. As presented in Table 1, the number of visitors rose from 16,402 in 2020 to 171,947 in 2024. This upward trend confirms that Perintis Lake has gained greater visibility and attractiveness as a rural tourism destination. However, this growth should not be interpreted as evidence of improved governance capacity. Rather, it reflects an expansion in destination demand that has not been matched by equivalent improvements in digital systems, service integration, or institutional readiness. In other words, visitor growth has outpaced governance adaptation.

Table 2. Tourist Visit Data at the Perintis Lake Tourist attraction

Years	Wisnus	Wisnas	Total
2020	16,402 People's	-	16.402 People's
2021	4,292 People's	-	4.292 People's
2022	39,845 People's	20 people's	39.505 People's
2023	143,799 People's	45 people's	143.844 People's
2024	171,891 People's	56 people's	171.947 People's

Source. Department of Tourism, Youth and Sports, Bone Bolango Regency (2025)

This finding becomes clearer when examined alongside the facility profile shown in Table 2. The destination already provides several physical amenities, such as gazebos, recreational bikes, water bikes, toilets, a musholla, culinary booths, and a selfie spot. These facilities indicate a visible commitment to improving the attractiveness of the site. Nevertheless, the infrastructure remains largely conventional and has not yet been transformed into digitally enabled tourism infrastructure. There is still no evidence of integrated destination information systems, digital visitor management, or technology based monitoring mechanisms. Thus, while facility provision has increased, the structural components required for smart tourism remain underdeveloped.

Table 3. Facilities available at Perintis Lake

No.	Facility	Amount
1.	Gazebo	6 units
2.	Recreational bikes	8 units
3.	Water bikes	8 units
4.	Musholla	1 unit
5.	Toilets	4 units
6.	Selfie spot (Copper Ship)	1 unit
7.	Culinary booth	10 units
8.	Tribun	1 unit

Source. Department of Tourism, Youth and Sports, Bone Bolango Regency, 2025

The gap between tourism growth and governance readiness is further confirmed by visitor expectations regarding smart tourism services. Field interviews revealed that around 75% of visitors expect digital maps, QR code-based information, and cashless payment options. However, Table 4 demonstrates that internet access remains limited, destination information is still delivered mainly through brochures and boards, and digital facilities are not yet available. These results indicate that the destination has not fully entered a smart tourism ecosystem because the digital layer of service delivery remains fragmented and incomplete.

Table 4. Comparison of Existing Conditions and Visitor Expectations regarding Smart Tourism Services

Service Aspects	Current Conditions	Visitor Expectations	Gaps
Internet Access	Limited to key areas	Free Wi-Fi throughout the area	High
Destination Information	Brochures and information boards	Interactive digital applications	High
Payment Systems	Dominant funds	Cashless payments (QRIS, e-wallet)	Medium
Digital Facilities	Not yet available	Sensors & monitoring systems	High

Source. Field Observation and Interview Results (2025)

From an interpretive standpoint, these findings show that increased visitors do not automatically translate into improved governance capacity. The policy system has succeeded in attracting people to the destination, but it has not yet developed the institutional and technological capability needed to manage growing demand in a coordinated manner. This is precisely where the smart tourism ecosystem perspective becomes relevant. Gretzel, Sigala, et al., (2015) and Gretzel, Werthner, et al., (2015) argue that smart tourism depends not only on technology adoption, but on the integration of actors, information flows, and governance processes. Likewise, Boes et al., (2016) emphasize that destination competitiveness is shaped by the interaction between smart experience, smart people, smart business, and smart governance. In the case of Perintis Lake, those dimensions remain unevenly developed.

This finding is consistent with previous studies highlighting the limited institutional capacity of local tourism authorities in managing tourism development. Hasan et al. (2025) found that the role of the Tourism Office in Bone Bolango Regency has not been fully optimized, particularly in terms of strategic coordination, digital based promotion, and stakeholder integration. The study emphasizes that tourism governance tends to remain administrative rather than transformative, which results in weak alignment between increasing tourist demand and institutional readiness. This condition reinforces the argument that the challenges observed in Perintis Lake are not merely technical, but are rooted in structural governance limitations that hinder the transition toward a fully integrated smart tourism ecosystem.

Theoretically, the evidence also reflects digital inequality in rural tourism governance. Digital exclusion is visible not only in the absence of infrastructure, but also in the low digital literacy

of local actors and the lack of system-wide policy integration. Consequently, the problem is not merely technical. It is institutional. The policy implication is that the local government should move beyond facility expansion and promotional growth toward structural digital readiness. This includes at least three priorities identified in the FGD process: expanding public Wi-Fi networks, developing an integrated destination application, and digitizing payment and ticketing systems. Without these interventions, rising tourist arrivals may continue, but service quality and governance responsiveness will remain limited.

Creative Economy Dynamics and the Limits of Local value Integration

The second major finding concerns the role of the creative economy in the tourism area. The study found that creative economic activities are already emerging through MSMEs and Pokdarwis, particularly in the form of culinary products, handicrafts, and community-based attractions rooted in local identity. This indicates that Perintis Lake does not suffer from a lack of community initiative. On the contrary, local actors are actively generating value and contributing to the tourism experience. However, this local value remains only partially integrated into the tourism system.

The main issue is that MSMEs and Pokdarwis continue to operate within a fragmented value chain. Most MSMEs still rely on conventional promotion, face limited access to digital markets, and use social media only in a sporadic and unsystematic way. Their products are sold mainly on-site, rather than being linked to a broader digital tourism platform that can connect product discovery, visitor information, payment, and post-visit engagement. Likewise, Pokdarwis functions as an important community intermediary, yet its institutional role remains under-supported and insufficiently integrated into the formal tourism governance structure.

This condition reveals why local value integration remains weak in practice. The problem is not simply the absence of digital tools, but the lack of policy coordination that connects tourism development with community economy development. In other words, the failure lies in the missing governance bridge between technology and local enterprise. Although the destination promotes tourism growth, there is still no fully integrated policy mechanism that aligns digital infrastructure, MSME strengthening, community training, and destination branding within one coherent framework. As a result, the creative economy grows organically, but it does not become a fully functional component of the smart tourism ecosystem.

Empirical support for this condition is further strengthened by Hasan et al. (2024), which specifically examined the development of Perintis Lake as a sustainable tourism destination. Rather than merely confirming infrastructural limitations, the study demonstrates that the core issue lies in the lack of integration between digital systems, policy frameworks, and community based economic actors. In particular, MSMEs and local communities have not been systematically embedded within a digitally connected tourism value chain. This finding deepens the present analysis by showing that the fragmentation observed in Perintis Lake is not only operational but also structural, reflecting a broader failure to institutionalize the linkage between smart tourism development and the creative economy.

These patterns are summarized in Table 5, which identifies four dominant themes emerging from the NVivo analysis: digital

readiness, community participation, creative entrepreneurship, and policy coordination. Each theme reflects not only an existing condition, but also a specific policy need. Importantly, the table shows that the local economy problem is inseparable from the governance problem. Weak digital readiness constrains market access, limited community participation reduces implementation capacity, and fragmented policy coordination prevents local products from being inserted into the broader tourism value chain.

Table 5. Summary of Key Themes and Policy Needs

Dominant Themes	Main Issues	Strategic Policy Directions
Digital Readiness	Low digital literacy	Training and public Wi-Fi
Community Participation	Pokdarwis is not yet optimal	Community empowerment and funding
Creative Entrepreneurship	Products are not yet digitalized	Online marketplace platforms and intellectual property rights
Policy Coordination	Institutions are fragmented	Data-driven smart governance

Source. NVivo 12 Plus Analysis Results (2025)

Viewed through the lens of the creative economy, these findings suggest that value co-creation has not yet been institutionally consolidated. In tourism, value is created not only by formal government action, but also by the interaction between visitors, communities, MSMEs, and intermediary groups such as Pokdarwis. However, co-creation requires governance arrangements that connect local production with tourism circulation. Pancawati & Widaswara (2023) emphasize that the creative economy can strengthen tourism potential when local products are embedded in a wider ecosystem of promotion, innovation, and market access. In Perintis Lake, this embedding remains weak. Therefore, MSMEs remain disconnected not because they are inactive, but because policy has not yet transformed them into integrated actors within the tourism system.

This finding also supports the collaborative governance perspective. Ansell & Gash (2018) argue that public problems involving multiple actors require shared platforms, coordination mechanisms, and joint problem solving. In the Perintis Lake case, such mechanisms are still limited. The implication is that rural tourism policy should no longer treat MSMEs and Pokdarwis as supplementary actors. They need to be positioned as core components of destination governance. Practical steps include integrating MSME products into official destination platforms, expanding digital marketing and payment support, strengthening product certification and legal protection, and providing sustainable institutional support for Pokdarwis. Without these measures, the creative economy will remain visible but structurally disconnected from the digital tourism agenda.

Toward an Adaptive Governance Model for Smart and Creative Rural Tourism

The two previous sections indicate that the central challenge at Perintis Lake is governance fragmentation. On one side, visitor demand continues to grow, but digital service systems remain underdeveloped. On the other side, local creative actors are active, but their contribution is not fully integrated into the destination economy. This dual gap shows that the policy problem is not sectoral, but relational. Technology, community economy, and tourism governance are developing in parallel, yet not in a sufficiently integrated manner.

This condition explains why local government commitment has not yet produced a coherent smart tourism transformation. The study found that tourism development, digitalization efforts, and MSME empowerment are still implemented in a sectoral way. As a result, increased visitors do not automatically improve governance capacity, and community creativity does not automatically strengthen destination competitiveness. Policy failure here should therefore be understood as a failure of integration. The destination has assets, demand, and social initiative, but it lacks an adaptive governance framework that can connect these elements into a functioning policy system.

These findings consolidate previous evidence (Hasan et al., 2024, 2025) by demonstrating that the core issue lies not only in technological limitations, but in the absence of an integrated governance framework linking digital infrastructure, institutional capacity, and community-based economic development.

This is the context in which the Integrated Smart Creative Lake Tourism Model (ISCLTM) becomes analytically relevant. The model, presented in Figure 3, integrates four mutually reinforcing pillars: Smart Experience, Smart Business Ecosystem, Smart People, and Smart Governance. Rather than treating digitalization as an isolated intervention, the model conceptualizes it as part of an adaptive feedback system linking technology, local creativity, and institutional coordination.

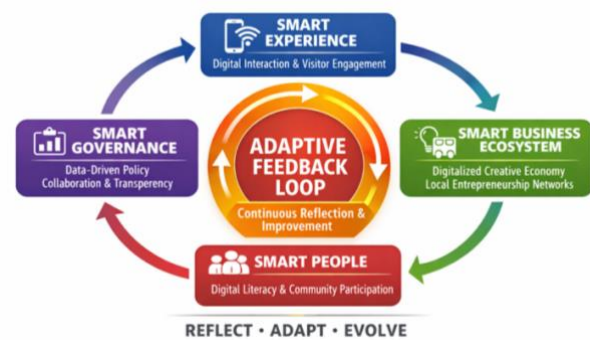


Figure 3. Integrated Smart Creative Lake Tourism Model (ISCLTM) Policy Model

The interpretation of Figure 3 is important. The Smart Experience pillar responds to the service gap identified in Tables 1 to 3 by emphasizing digital information, interactive applications, and better visitor oriented services. The Smart Business Ecosystem pillar addresses the disconnection of MSMEs from tourism circulation by promoting digital integration of local products, platform-based promotion, and stronger market access. The Smart People pillar responds to the low digital literacy identified in the field by emphasizing training, capacity building, and community empowerment. Finally, the Smart Governance

pillar addresses the most structural issue, namely fragmented institutions and the absence of coordinated policy implementation.

The model also incorporates an adaptive feedback loop, which is crucial in rural tourism governance. Tourism destinations are dynamic social spaces. Visitor expectations change, digital tools evolve, and local economic opportunities shift over time. Therefore, governance cannot remain static. It must be reflective, iterative, and capable of learning from local conditions. This argument is consistent with the collaborative and innovative governance perspective, which emphasizes coordination, adaptability, and multi-actor problem solving (Andrades et al., 2024; Ansell & Gash, 2018).

The implication of this model is that smart tourism in rural destinations should be approached as a governance project rather than merely a technology project. Public Wi-Fi, e-payment, digital maps, and QR-based information remain important, but they will not be transformative unless they are institutionally connected to MSME development, community participation, and interagency coordination. In the same way, creative economic initiatives will not generate sustainable local value if they remain outside the digital tourism system. Thus, the ISCLTM model offers a policy direction that is both practical and theoretical. Practically, it provides a structured framework for integration. Theoretically, it extends the smart tourism ecosystem perspective by showing that in rural destinations, digital transformation succeeds only when coupled with local value co-creation and adaptive governance.

Overall, the results confirm that the future of Perintis Lake as a sustainable rural destination depends not only on attracting more visitors, but on building the governance capacity to manage growth, reduce digital inequality, and integrate local economic actors into the tourism system. This is the key policy lesson emerging from the study.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the main obstacle to integrating smart tourism and the creative economy in Perintis Lake is not the lack of local potential, but the failure of policy integration under conditions of digital inequality. The increase in visitor numbers from 16,402 in 2020 to 171,947 in 2024 demonstrates rising destination demand, yet it does not signify stronger governance capacity. Basic facilities have expanded, but digital infrastructure, service interoperability, community digital literacy, and interagency coordination remain weakly connected. Similarly, MSMEs and Pokdarwis already contribute local value to the tourism experience, but they remain only partially integrated into the tourism value chain because policy support for digital linkage, product scaling, and institutional coordination is still fragmented.

The study therefore offers a governance-based explanation of integration failure in a rural tourism context, while proposing the Integrated Smart Creative Lake Tourism Model (ISCLTM) as an adaptive policy response. The model connects Smart Experience, Smart Business Ecosystem, Smart People, and Smart Governance within a feedback oriented governance system. Its theoretical contribution lies in bridging the smart tourism ecosystem perspective, creative economy value co-creation, and collaborative governance within the context of nature-based rural tourism. Its practical implication is equally direct: local governments should move beyond sectoral tourism promotion and develop an integrated policy framework that strengthens

digital readiness, embeds MSMEs and Pokdarwis in the destination value chain, and institutionalizes cross-sector coordination. In this sense, sustainable rural tourism is not achieved through digitalization alone, but through governance arrangements capable of aligning technology, local creativity, and community inclusion within one adaptive public policy system.

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